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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [UK](#)
SUBJECT: LABOUR LOSES ELECTION IN WALES FOR FIRST TIME IN
91 YEARS: END OF AN ERA?

REF: LONDON 1186

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Greg Berry for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: The Welsh Labour Party was drubbed in June 4 European Parliamentary elections, dropping 12 percent from its 2004 result and losing a seat to the right-wing anti-EU UK Independence Party. The Conservative Party nudged ahead of the Labour Party by just under one percent to hand Labour its first election loss in Wales since ¶1918. However, the Conservatives gained mostly because Labour voters stayed home, not because they won new voters. In fact the Conservatives got 30,000 fewer votes than in ¶2004. Neither of the other two major parties, the nationalist Plaid Cymru or the Liberal Democrats, were able to take advantage of Labour's debacle to make significant gains. So while pundits are declaring the potential end of Labour dominance in Wales and the Labour Party is bemoaning its situation, it remains an open question as to what Welsh voters will do when it comes to Welsh Assembly and Westminster elections. Conservatives argue that they are now in a position of strength. However, as a prominent Welsh civil society figure noted, Welsh voters "are not natural conservatives," and while not voting at all is one thing, for Welsh voters to throw their votes to the Conservatives in Westminster, who have traditionally been seen as hostile to Wales, is another. Welsh Labour is clearly in a period of crisis, but the Welsh electorate still has not swung behind another party and made up its mind about where it wants to go. End Summary and Comment.

Labour Loses its Heartland

¶2. (U) Wales has traditionally been one of Labour's firmest strongholds in the UK, but last week's European Parliamentary election results saw the party's overall share of the vote plummet by 12 percent compared to 2004. For the first time since 1918 the Labour Party has lost an election in Wales, with the Conservative Party outpolling it by 6,300 votes. The 12 percentage points Labour lost were distributed fairly evenly between the Conservatives (1.8 percent), Plaid Cymru (1.1 percent), the UK Independence Party (2.3 percent), the Green Party (2 percent), the British National Party (2.5 percent), and several other small parties. Wales sends a total of four MEPs to the EU Parliament. Labour lost one of its two seats, which was picked up by the anti-EU UKIP, while nationalist party Plaid Cymru and the Conservatives remain at one MEP each. Two of Wales's four MEPs will be from right-wing parties, which would have seemed unthinkable even a few months ago to most Welsh politicians. The symbolism of the Conservatives beating Labour in Wales was so great that Conservative leader David Cameron traveled to Wales to celebrate with the party faithful and confidently crow that all of Wales is now winnable territory for the Conservatives.

What Does it Mean for National Elections?

13. (U) The numbers are striking. Of the 40 UK Parliament districts in Wales, only 15 voted for Labour last week whereas 17 voted Conservative. Welsh Labour currently has 29 seats in Westminster to the Conservatives' meager 3. This electoral result is all the more worrisome for Labour in that it comes in the wake of a string of poor showings for Labour in Wales, most recently in the 2008 local elections, in which Labour dropped by 9.8 percent and Conservatives increased their share of the votes by 5 percent.

14. (C) Welsh pundits are competing with one another to describe the extent to which this is a cataclysm in Welsh politics. Daran Hill, a political consultant with centrist leanings, described the results as perhaps the end of a century of single-party domination. He told Poloff that this may herald a future in which the four major parties in Wales jockey as equals. Graham Benfield, the CEO of an umbrella organization that funnels Welsh Government funds to 30,000 voluntary associations in Wales, told Poloff that Wales had been almost a Communist-like political entity, with people professing knee-jerk loyalty to Labour without regard for its policies or leaders. He argued that the current parliamentary expense scandals (see reftel) may have finally broken the taboo on voting for someone other than Labour for many Welsh voters. He called these elections a key step in the "maturing" of Welsh politics and the start of a period in which the Welsh vote based on their ideas rather than loyalties passed down through the generations.

Labour Party Reaction

15. (C) The Labour Party in Wales is clearly reeling. MP

Dr. Hywel Francis, Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee in Parliament, told Poloff that the party would be holding a "postmortem" on June 13 to diagnose its defeat. Francis likened the situation to 1983, the previous highpoint for Conservatives in Wales, when they won 14 seats in Parliament (Labour won 20). Francis attributed Labour's failure largely to UK-wide phenomena, primarily the MPs expense scandals, the economy and doubts about the Government's ability to protect the social safety net upon which many Welsh depend. He noted that the fight within the Labour party between the "Mandelson wing" favoring privatization and the "Harman wing" favoring a "progressive social agenda" will have a major effect on the party's success in Wales, where government spending is a much larger part of the economy than in other parts of the UK. While Francis was downbeat generally and did not seek to sugarcoat the defeat, he did express hope that an improving economy would help and that Labour might stem its losses since voters had not definitively swung to other parties. He noted that PM Gordon Brown replaced Paul Murphy with Peter Hain as the Secretary of State for Wales last week because Hain is a better campaigner.

Is It So Bad for Labour?

16. (SBU) Despite the doom and gloom for Labour, there are mitigating factors that complicate the reading of the results. Welsh voters tend to be much more pro-Labour in Parliamentary elections than in European or local elections. Even Welsh Conservatives acknowledge that the average Welsh voter's politics lie significantly to the left of the broader UK Conservative Party and Welsh voters may be less willing to go over to the Conservatives in a Parliamentary election.

17. (SBU) Also arguing against a sea change in Welsh attitudes is the most underreported story in this election, which is that Welsh voters stayed away in massive numbers. Only 685,000 Welsh voted in the elections, representing 30.4 percent of the electorate. In 2004, 922,000 voted, or about 41.4 percent of the electorate. This drop of 11 percent roughly mirrors the percentage Labour lost and is dramatically more than the 3.7 percent drop overall in the UK. Wales went from having a 3 percent higher turnout than the UK average in 2004 to a 4 percent lower turnout. Labour

voters stayed home to send a protest message but they did not flock to other parties. The Conservatives actually got 30,000 fewer voters than they did in 2004.

Plaid Cymru Fails to Benefit from Labour's Loss

18. (SBU) Plaid Cymru (1.1 percent) solidified several districts where it was strong and may look to pick up an extra seat here or there but they finished 1.8 percent behind Labour and were not able to capitalize on a catastrophic Labour result to make significant gains. Plaid views the election as a huge disappointment, since they could not surpass Labour even at Labour's darkest hour, according to our contacts. Plaid politicians contrast their poor showing with Northern Ireland and Scotland, where the nationalist parties came in first. Some are wondering whether Plaid is paying the price for being in a coalition government with Labour.

19. (SBU) Comment: Although it can be a fool's game to read too much into results from an election that sparked little public interest and saw turnout fall, our interlocutors agree that Wales has become a much more open electoral playing field. All the national parties can legitimately see the run-up to the next general election as an opportunity to win over significant numbers of previously committed, but now up-for-grabs voters. End Comment.

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